



United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0905

BILL NELSON
FLORIDA

September 10, 2003

Honorable Donald H. Rumsfeld
Secretary of Defense
Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20310

Dear Mr. Secretary:

After an extended discussion in the Senate Armed Services Committee yesterday with Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz and General Myers, I write to request that you disapprove or modify the Department of the Army's unit rotation policy for forces currently engaged in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Apparently the Army has decided to require units currently in the OIF Theater of Operations to serve twelve consecutive months before redeploying them home to the United States. I disagree with this standard for the forces that participated in the major combat phase of OIF and ask that you direct the Army to reconsider this policy and find a way to bring the current force home as soon as possible.

I acknowledge that the commander on the ground must make the tactical decisions associated with when to replace forces engaged in the ongoing security and stabilization operations in Iraq. We should not give the commander unacceptable or avoidable risk with a rotation plan that leaves gaps in his required mission areas.

The Army's twelve-month rotation policy may make sense for fresh units on their way to Iraq. New units will enter what is now a much more mature Theater of Operations with better established security and logistics systems capable of meeting more than the most basic operating and living requirements. However, for the bulk of the forces in Iraq who participated in major combat, especially our Guard and Reserves mobilized nearly one year ago, now is the time to bring them out.

I fully understand that replacement units must be identified, trained and arriving in Iraq before units currently there may withdraw. I was surprised, therefore, to learn that the Army recently rescinded its alert notification of July 25th to the combat brigades of other States' National Guard units. These units might very well be ready to relieve units in Iraq by now if they had been mobilized after alert.

I ask that you also keep in mind that our Guard and Reserve soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines begin making their sacrifices the moment they are mobilized--regardless of ultimate location or operating and living conditions. I have tried to make an argument for the fastest possible relief of all our forces, Active as well as Reserves, which participated in major combat operations. However, livelihoods and civilian careers are inherently at risk for deployed Guard and Reserve troops. Despite the job and financial protections we have established for them in law, conditions are never exactly the same when they get home after extended deployments.

This is a very complex and challenging situation and we must respect the military judgment of the commander on the ground. But at the same time, I know that the Florida National Guard stepped up the instant it was called upon with magnificently well lead and prepared combat troops. And I share the apprehension of so many Florida families that they may be held in Theater longer than apparently justified and fair.

I sincerely appreciate your consideration of this request. I believe that the Army is trying to meet the requirements of the commander on the ground, but I also believe that they can be met in a manner that gives the troops that have fought and won the war the relief they deserve and need.

Sincerely,

Bill Nelson